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Stream: Work, family and life integration

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The Sound of Silence: The absence of voice in determining flexible working arrangements

Introduction

In the context of a dramatically reconfigured labour market characterized by an individualistic culture and increasingly enmeshed life domains of employees, there is raised awareness of how employees may shape or modify their work arrangements. A small component of broader scholarship addressing issues that affect the social context in which individuals work, has focused on the role of 'employee voice' in determining flexible-work outcomes (Donnelly et al., 2012). Employee voice is a broad term incorporating a spectrum of different practices designed to give employees a say in organisational issues and decisions (Dundon et al., 2004). This article extends work on voice and workplace flexibility by focusing not simply on 'voice' but on its antithesis: employee silence. Silence is defined here, (following Van Dyne et al., 2003), as the intentional withholding of ideas, information and opinions. The consequences of employee silence in achieving work-life preferences are likely to be significant for both individuals and organizations, in achieving for example, the goals of business efficiency and facilitating employees' needs to fulfill multiple roles and minimize work-life interference. Research demonstrates, for example, that conciliatory exchanges around workplace flexibility has implications for employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviours and turnover intentions (Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

Previous quantitative work in Australia has explored some of the reasons why certain employees ('discontent non-requesters') do not ask for workplace flexibility. These reasons include workplace cultures, insecurity in the job market, the nature of the job, and being new to the job (Pocock et al., 2012; Skinner and Pocock, 2011). These studies have focused on a discrete number of substantive forms of workplace flexibility (e.g., part-time work) and identify a relatively narrow band of explanations for why employees do not make requests. In contrast, this study seeks to uncover, in the context of formal organizational policies and structures, a range of nuanced workplace practices that close down possibilities for employee voice and perpetuate silence on matters relating a broader spectrum of

workplace flexibility provisions. Utilising a framework developed by Donaghey et al (2011) which considers silence as a component in the control dialectic, and in-depth interviews with individuals who have declined to ask for flexibility despite their preferences to do so, the study reveals disjunctures between organizational goals and policies and everyday experiences, practices and norms encountered in workplaces (McDonald et al., 2012).

The Question

The article extends limited existing work on employee voice as it relates to requesting and taking up flexible work arrangements. . It begins with the premise that employees have the right to an effective voice in their workplaces and that more needs to be known about the reasons for employee silence on matters where they indicate dissatisfaction. The article seeks to explore the existence and consequences of employee silence in relation to customising the timing, location and tasks of their work by examining the ways in which institutional arrangements and structures are experienced by workers.

The Method

The study utilised individual telephone interview transcripts from employees working in a range of organisations across Australia. The interviewees had previously participated in the 2012 AWALI survey and had been identified at the time of that survey as ‘discontent non-requesters’ (Skinner and Pocock, 2011: 75), meaning that they had expressed a desire to request at least one workplace flexibility provision to accommodate their non-work responsibilities, but had not done so. Interviewees were asked to articulate both the reasons for, and consequences of, their silence. The analysis identified text that illustrated four silence themes developed from the literature: acquiescent, defensive, prosocial and opportunistic. Within each of these themes, specific manager-subordinate interactions and normative workplace behaviours were identified.

Policy Implications

Scholarship on work-life integration has established a significant gap between policies that espouse the availability and uptake of workplace flexibility and the practices and norms experienced by workers in everyday work settings. That is, significant numbers of employees are effectively precluded from accessing flexible working arrangements due to organisational practices which structure silence on those issues. Policy alone cannot achieve cultural change (Nowak et al., 2013; Lewis, 2010). The consequences of silence are felt not only by the individual, in terms of stress and lack of time with family, but also the employer, in terms of disengaged employees and high staff turnover.

The Findings

1. There is a gap between flexible working policies and the organisational practices and arrangements that are experienced by employees. Employee silence is perpetuated in this space.
2. Management facilitate employee silence around requests for flexibility by creating a climate where specific issues are clearly understood as 'off the agenda' and where employees believe that making such requests will result in punishment. Examples of acquiescent, defensive, prosocial and opportunistic silence are all evidenced in the study.
3. The analysis finds evidence of silence acting both against individual employees and against management as a consequence of the absence of effective voice.

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